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Social Art and Participatory Action Research in Contested Urban Space

Abstract: This article examines creative co-research with groups experiencing homelessness and the effects of rapid urban development. It draws upon two projects which combine social art practices and a feminist participatory action research (PAR) approach. The paper argues that bridging PAR and social arts practice, whilst underutilised and under theorised together, is an approach that offers some key opportunities as well as challenges. In highlighting these challenges, the paper acknowledges the role of power dynamics and broader issues associated with artists working in urban development contexts where relationships between local authorities, developers, the culture sector and residents are increasingly complex and entangled. In analysing the difficulties and risks within creative, participatory projects, the paper calls for an 'ethic of care' and a focus on collectively building knowledge about unequal political, economic and social structures with groups affected by rapid urban development and displacement.

Keywords: social art; participatory action research; gentrification; housing; artwashing.

Introduction

This article examines methods of creative research and collective action in the context of homelessness and rapid urban change, written from the point of view of three social art practitioners, producers and researchers. We draw upon two social art projects in Newcastle upon Tyne. In an honest analysis of these projects we examine the radical potential of combining social art practice with participatory action research (PAR) and the implications concerning housing struggles and community-led activism in inner city contexts. Bridging PAR and social arts practice is an approach that has been underutilised and undertheorised yet offers some key opportunities as well as challenges. We specifically examine the potentials for a *feminist* approach to

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PAR and social art practice – one which we explore through a focus on forms of action through care and personal connection. Following an introduction to the two projects and a discussion of the methods employed, we will then situate this work in the literature and practice of both social art and PAR. The following section discusses power dynamics, examining what artistic methods prove useful and consequential for social action and inner city housing struggles. We reflect on the broader issues associated with artists working in urban development contexts where relationships between local authorities, developers, the culture sector and residents is becoming increasingly complex and entangled.

Project 1: Protohome

Protohome was a public artwork and self-build housing installation, temporarily sited in Newcastle from May-August 2016.[1] Co-built with people in housing need over four months, and erected on site in two weeks, it was then open to the public exhibiting documentation of the project and hosting events, workshops, exhibitions, performances, artist residencies and talks, examining issues of homelessness, the politics of land and development and participatory housing alternatives. During the build process we worked with joiners from TILT Workshop for four months to train people with experience of homelessness (members of the charity Crisis) in woodwork and design skills. In the workshops we used a timber-frame method of building specifically designed for untrained self-builders called the Segal Method.

Image 1: *Protohome* during an event (photo credit: John Hipkin)

Project 2: Dwellbeing

The second project is called *Dwellbeing*,[2] which takes an arts-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach to exploring the effects of rapid urban development in the neighborhood of Shieldfield. Its aim is to collectively imagine strategies and actions to tackle current and future urban change in the area. Shieldfield's ward has seen increasing development pressures with a 467 per cent increase in student housing numbers from 2011 to 2015[3] which has affected the character and social mix of the area.[4] The project was initiated in 2017 in response to this context, in collaboration with a newly formed group of community members, composed of 20-30 people of mixed ages, and a local arts organisation – Shieldfield Art Works (SAW).

Many residents that we have worked with feel distant from institutions of power, ignored and disempowered. As one Shieldfield resident explained: "We feel as if we've been left behind. I'm passionate about Shieldfield [...] I've always lived here and I've seen all the changes. But it's so sad, the decline in the community, and the spirit's gone. We've been promised different things so many times and we've been let down."[5] Furthermore, they are increasingly worried about the long term future of the area, fearing that the close proximity of the neighborhood to the city centre will create continuing development pressures which could displace them from their homes.
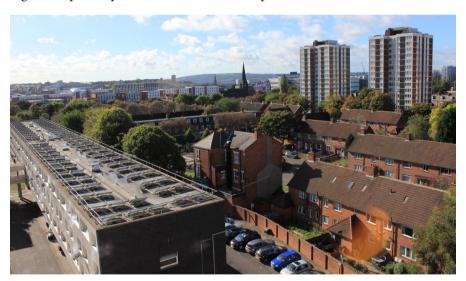

Image 2: Shieldfield (photo credit: Julia Heslop)

[2] The project is funded by Newcastle University and charitable trusts.

[3] Newcastle City Council, "Maintaining Sustainable Communities Supplementary Planning Document," 2017, https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/sites/default/files/wwwfileroot/planning-and-buildings/planning-policy/6.1_maintaining_sustainable_communities_spd_v1.pdf, acc. on September 20, 2018.

[4] A 2014 consultation identified it as lacking 'social capital' with few community leaders and effective community organisations and facilities making community governance fragmented (Your Back Yard, 2014).

[5] Interview with co-researcher 1, 2018.

Process

These projects combine social art practices with a participatory action research (PAR) approach. Whilst the critical pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is often said to have formed the foundations of PAR, for the past two decades attention to PAR in art and academic contexts has been growing.[6] Usually in PAR project participants set the terms and boundaries of the knowledge production process, as well as undertake its evaluation. Yet in *Protohome* group members did not initiate the project and did not evaluate it. This was due to the fact that the lives of members were hugely complex, as people moved on and off the streets, and came in and out of the project. However, a cyclic collective decision making process of planning, action and reflection,[7] enabled us, as a group, to analyse what was working and what was not and change the course of action accordingly. Furthermore the group developed an evolving statement of ethics – a 'group contract' which outlined what was expected of each other during the site build. This included respect for each other and to look out for each other's well being on site. As one member said, "sharing responsibility… for each other, for the equipment, for the wood, for the whole build and for the project itself"[8] was vital. These methodological tactics helped members to own and direct the process, to represent themselves, as well as to look after each other, through a sense of reciprocity. Stemming from feminist theories of caring and connection, central to this approach is the recognition that humans are bound up in a mutual 'interdependence' with each other.[9]

Building on this experience, from the outset of *Dwellbeing* we worked with the group to collectively establish research aims and actions as well as an ethical framework. Since December 2017 our fortnightly meetings loosely alternate between processes of *action*, such as field trips, practical or craft workshops, and data gathering; *reflection*, such as group discussion, reflective journaling and revising shared aims and objectives; and *planning* future actions. We continue to revisit our aims and review our actions which allows the project to be fluid and responsive to the needs of everyone involved. At the beginning of every meeting we reiterate our values and make changes to these as necessary. Furthermore, in the process of collectively creating our constitution in 2019, we reflected on our aims, purpose and approach, and co-wrote a manifesto, which we expect to evolve as the project does.

In both projects designing, planning and building together has been significant. In the *Protohome* workshops group members learnt basic woodwork skills and were introduced to the basic design software, Sketch Up. The method of timber frame building that we used – the Segal method – is specifically designed for untrained self-builders being built on a dimensional frame, using only dry jointing techniques

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[6] Cf. Sara Kindon, Rachel Pain, and Mike Kesby, eds., *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting people, participation and place* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Interview with group member 1, 2016.

[9] Cf. Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

and simple hand tools.[10] The use of simple plans and techniques meant that group members could more easily understand the process of building, as well as undertake a gradual process of learning. As one of the joiners said in the initial project launch to members: "The whole point of this project is that with very limited tools we can build something quite substantial […] and that's how they've done it for thousands of years. So it's more interesting because you're actually getting skilled up."[11]

Image 3: *Protohome* members learning whilst building the floor (photo credit: John Hipkin)

Image 4: *Dwellbeing* trip to Middlesbrough with artist Isabel Lima, to learn about the issues of 'managed decline' and resident action (photo credit: Julia Heslop)

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[10] Jon Broome, "Mass housing cannot be sustained," in: *Architecture and Participation*, ed. by Peter Blundell Jones, Doina Petrescu, and Jeremy Till, (Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 65–76.

[11] Conversation with joiner, 2016.

These processes of learning were part of a wider process of sharing experience and collective analyses of societal processes. Group conversations about homelessness and self-building opened up space to explicitly examine the relationship between homelessness, exclusionary urban space, housing policy and austerity, broadening the reach of the conversation from the scale of the local authority to that of national policy. Whilst group conversations could be cathartic, creating a sense of self-recognition between people, they were also spaces of heightened emotions.

In *Dwellbeing,* our initial workshops and discussions with co-researchers attempted to build up a knowledge base about the current situation in Shieldfield through archival research, workshops with town planners, facilitating conversations between residents and local councillors and students. It also included community litter picks and walks, participating in an art project about the dynamics of global power and wealth in the city and a field trip to Gresham in Middlesbrough, another neighbourhood experiencing 'managed decline'. Gresham has gone through a process of housing demolition and during this trip we met with an artist who is working with residents, including those seeking asylum, to devise strategies to take ownership of the neighbourhood. Through this multi-faceted approach, we have built collective knowledge about the present situation, its causes and effects, moving analysis of the problem beyond 'locals vs students' or 'residents vs local authority', to analyse the hidden systems and structures of wealth and power, connecting our local concerns with wider national and global realities.

Two main strands of 'action' have emerged in this process: a proposal for a co-designed and built community research building called 'Shieling' and a neighbourhood zine called 'Shieldfield Wave'. Our early conversations were loaded with expressions of lament for the past – loss of community and social spaces – which could not be ignored. Shieling has emerged as a symbol for prompting co-produced, locally-rooted and ecological urban development. The building is intended to be built in the grounds of SAW acting as a hub for *Dwellbeing*'s activity, as well as other community uses, but foremost to be a site for community research, events and workshops into issues of urban development, land and housing activism. Shieldfield was once a 'shieling ground' – common land where people would graze their livestock in the summer months. The word 'shieling' refers to the huts or bothies where people would live and were made out of the materials found directly in the landscape, such as heather, earth and stones. During 2019, we underwent a scoping and design period incorporating walks to examine the neighbourhood's history and materiality, brick-making workshops, and design workshops with a local architect. So far this process has triggered a wider understanding of the role that access to, and ownership of, land plays in development processes. For group members Shieling is a symbolic and physical tool to evoke a sense of connection between people and the land in the face of development pressures.

Image 5: *Dwellbeing* brickmaking workshop (photo credit: Julia Heslop)

In parallel, after workshops with a local printmaker and activist, the first edition of Shieldfield Wave zine was launched. Themed 'Finding Our Voice,' it included excerpts from a pamphlet by a local historian on the changing face of the community, a section about those who live and work in the area, an article about student accommodation development, as well as 'events' and 'kids' pages. For example, the feature article shares residents' views on the impacts of student accommodation developments including the loss of green spaces and reduced sense of community. One resident reflected on the felling of old trees to make way for new development: "When the land was still a piece of green land with four very old pine trees, when walking past I'd often go and touch the resin from those trees. The strong refreshing smell would cheer me up. Then I walked past and did not find the trees in their normal shape. It felt to me like a few healthy happy old persons had been killed for no reason."[12] And an article on the history of Shieldfield describes how the neighbourhood has experienced multiple cycles of development, since the first industrial communities settled in the early 1900s and again in the 'slum clearances' of the 1950s, noting that communities struggled to restore "the values of the lost community […] because of the uncertainty of the time and the movement of the people."[13] The article highlights that "[t]his is the problem of today, the uncertainty of security in the communities, people have become isolated from each other and gradually the old land marks of Shieldfield are vanishing."[14] We have used this edition as a tool for communicating the project to the wider

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[12] Interview with co-researcher 1, 2018.

[13] John Armstrong, *Canny People of Shieldfield* (2005): no page.

[14] Ibid.

neighbourhood, as well as to 'speak back' to people in positions of power.[15] We have found that zines enable information to be disseminated quickly and cheaply, without the need for specialist skills or technical equipment, and can hold many voices at once, providing a platform for wider communication and building social movements.[16] In developing this, the next edition will focus on recent learning about land ownership, planning policy and the impact of austerity on local government budgets and policy.

Image 6: *Dwellbeing* community zine entitled 'Shieldfield Wave' (photo credit: Julia Heslop)

Image 7: *Dwellbeing* 'Shieling' design festival (photo credit: Mikey Tomkins)

[15] Caitlin Cahill, "Defying gravity? Raising consciousness through collective research," *Children's Geographies* 2, 2 (2004): 273–86.

[16] Michelle Kempson, "'My Version of Feminism': Subjectivity, DIY and the Feminist Zine," *Social Movement Studies* 14, 4 (2015): 459–72.

In both *Protohome* and *Dwellbeing,* making and creating provides a framework which prioritises learning and building self-knowledge. Describing his experience of the project, one Protohome member stated: "For me now it's about taking the reins back… I think you lose it when you get into the system."[17] For others, it was a learning process: "I've learnt that it's not the buildings that hold the value but the land."[18] Furthermore, both of these projects have provided an important space for bonding and moments of care. A *Protohome* member described the group as 'a family', whilst a Shieldfield resident originally from Sudan, remarked on the significance of the opportunity to form meaningful connections with fellow community members. These accounts highlight that embedded processes of co-production can sometimes offer a space for learning and new social connections to emerge. However, these spaces are not without their tensions. Neighbourhoods and groups embody their own hierarchies. But in order not to suppress or hide tensions there is a need for a more agonistic approach to learning, whereby multiple views may never be fully reconciled. Whilst this may be challenging and disruptive, it can also prove to be honest and productive. For example, during the *Protohome* workshops many members experienced different existential and health issues that affected the whole group. One member struggled with his mental health, and was also street sleeping. He was often tired or unwell and this emerged in moments of frustration directed at other members. During one workshop he stated to another member: "I wish I could hit her with a hammer but I know I can't… This has gone skewwhif 'cause I'm asking [her] to work together and help us but she's gannin deein her own thing."[19] Reflecting back on this moment, the member he directed this frustration at stated: "Well personally for me speaking it was just like any other family. There were moments that were tricky [...] there were moments when there was a bit of miscommunication or there were moments when people were just upset, and because of that whole supportive environment, because of that openness, [...] because it was family, we all supported each other through those tricky moments so they never lasted."[20] As workshop facilitators we worked through these situations through dialogue and reflection instead of ignoring them. In *Dwellbeing* there is always the danger that community meetings replicate accepted forms of engagement and discussion, inherited from traditional, top down local authority consultation. As one co-researcher observed: "We need to make sure that if someone wants to speak that they don't feel intimidated. Otherwise it's just those with the loudest voice that gets listened to."[21]

We understand that through our methods there is a danger of reproducing power relations. Whilst *appearing* to decentre inherited power, we might actually recentre this by replicating oppressive power relations, such as structures of labour (paid/

[17] Interview with group member 2, 2016.

[18] Interview with co-researcher 2, 2017.

[19] Conversation with group member 3, 2016.

[20] Interview with co-researcher 3, 2017.

[21] Interview with co-researcher 4, 2017.

unpaid), extractive methods of research and tokenism. Freire[22] warns of 'well-intentioned professionals' imposing 'their own values and ideology' instead of listening to and being in dialogue with the world view of the community. In both projects we realise that our positionality as artists and arts producers, and as middle-class white women, takes careful and constant thinking through. As a result, we have found that practicing care requires more than simply good intentions. "[i]t requires a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation"[23] and of the needs, competencies and situations of all involved, including our own.

Working with or Against?

Our 'social art' practice draws inspiration from feminist and civil rights activists of the 1960s and 1970s and the emergence of the Community Arts Movement and ideas of cultural democracy in the UK around the same time.[24] These movements were inherently politicised projects, grounded in grassroots campaigns and counter-cultural actions. Yet, despite such roots, social art practice has increasingly found itself attached to state agendas and cycles of art commissioning for social benefit. Consequently, the majority of social art commissions are sanctioned and celebrated by funders and governments.[25] This is what Alberto Duman[26] calls an 'aesthetic dividend' – one which serves the privileged narratives of politicians, private developers and local planning authorities. As a result social art practice has been used as a conduit to imitate publics within development, rather than empowering existing communities, and its practitioners are today often cast as the foot soldiers of displacement and gentrification.[27]

As practitioners working in the public realm we take a critical perspective on processes of 'creative placemaking' which, often results in 'artwashing'[28] and cul-

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[22] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2007 /1970/).

[23] Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 168.

[24] Sophie Hope, "From community arts to the socially engaged art commission," in: *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British community arts movement*, ed. by Alison Jeffers (London: Bloomsbury), 203–22.

[25] Faranak Miraftab, "Invited and invented spaces of participation: Neoliberal citizenship and feminists' expanded notion of politics," *Wagadu* 1, 1 (2004): 1–7.

[26] Alberto Duman, "Not here, right now/right here, not now: unfolding the context in Alana Jelinek's This Is Not Art," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 13, 3 (2014): 203–26.

[27] Magally Miranda *and* Kyle Lane-McKinley, "Artwashing, or, Between Social Practice and Social Reproduction," *A Blade Of Grass*, 2017, http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/artwashing-social-practice-social-reproduction/, acc. on September 19, 2018.

[28] S. Pritchard, "Extracting New Cultural Value From Urban Regeneration: The Intangible Rise of the Social Capital Artist," *Sluice*, https://colouringinculture.org/blog/theintangibleriseofthesocialcapitalartist/, acc. on September 15, 2021.

ture-led gentrification.[29] Critical reflection on this by practitioners is rare, although beginning to emerge.[30] As McLean emphasises, many theoretical accounts of 'art-washing' lack nuance and posit a 'limiting binary' that either casts artists as conscious agents of gentrification or as helpless victims.[31] For McLean, this 'heavy-handed critical stance' ignores and renders invisible the efforts by some artists 'to carve out spaces for critique' through critical and reflexive practice.

Projects similar to ours have been accused of 'community artwashing' whereby artists become embedded within communities through creative processes, only to be used as a vehicle for 'processes of community-consultation-by-art'.[32] We are fully aware of these criticisms and contradictions and the issues play out in and around our work. For instance, *Protohome* occupied a site owned by a local community development trust, at the heart of the Ouseburn Valley – Newcastle's 'cultural area' – which borders Shieldfield. Being temporarily sited there, *Protohome* could be seen as part of a new tradition of 'temporary' artworks, making use of underused or 'meanwhile' urban space.[33] Whilst this was not a meanwhile space, and was not privately owned, this area is becoming increasingly desirable for developers. The setting of *Dwellbeing* holds similar tensions as it is close to the Ouseburn Valley, which is causing further development pressures. This threat is recognised by residents. In the words of one co-researcher: "It'll do no good turning the area in an arty farty area."[34] However, criticisms of such projects do not often account for the deep relationships, commitment and solidarity between artists and community members, the strengthening of 'community-produced knowledge' and the cultivation of a 'rhetoric of dissent' that can actively push back against neoliberal urban policies.[35] Positioning questions of care at the centre of our practice and building knowledge on the social structures which distribute resources unequally[36] has enabled us, in some respects, to do this.

Both projects retain 'good' relationships with local councillors, universities and developers, however we do not work *with* them. We understand the role these

[29] Venda Louise Pollock and Ronan Paddison, "On place-making, participation and public art: The Gorbals, Glasgow," *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 7, 1 (2014): 85–105.

[30] Cara Courage, *Arts in Place: The arts, the urban and social Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

[31] Heather McLean, "Cracks in the creative city: The contradictions of community arts practice," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, 6 (2014): 2156–73.

[32] S. Pritchard, "Extracting New Cultural Value From Urban Regeneration: The Intangible Rise of the Social Capital Artist," *Sluice*, 2017, https://colouringinculture.org/blog/theintangiblriseofthesocialcapitalartist/, acc. on September 15, 2021.

[33] Mara Ferreri, "The seductions of temporary urbanism," *ephemera* 15, 1 (2015): 181–91.

[34] Interview with co-researcher 5, 2017.

[35] Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty, eds. *Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art: The British community arts movement* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 242.

[36] Caitlin Cahill, "Defying gravity? Raising consciousness through collective research," *Children's Geographies* 2, 2 (2004): 282.

actors play in housing struggles. Not afraid to have difficult and uncomfortable conversations, we have initiated direct interactions between Shieldfield residents and managers of student accommodation, town planners, local councillors and other local authority staff. Likewise, during *Protohome,* public events in the 'house', including group members presenting the project, offered an active space to have challenging discussions about housing, homelessness and austerity policies between group members, housing professionals, developers, council officers, academics and the general public. Whilst this does not completely upturn unequal power relations, self-representation can go some way to subverting existing hierarchical structures about 'legitimate' knowledge opening up routes for potentially isolated people to speak to formal institutions of power.

Conclusion: Care, Connection and Resistance

These two projects prompt questions into the role and potential of PAR and social art practice to respond to housing struggles, as well as reveal the tensions bound up within these processes – such as the role of micro and macro power relations and the dangers of 'co-option' and artwashing. Through a focus on methodology, we highlight potentials for collective learning through processes of creative designing, making and organising, whether this be building a prototype house in the case of *Protohome*, or designing a community zine or a research and activist space in *Dwellbeing*. We see true potential in creative, collaborative and reflexive processes, no matter how messy they may be. Yet there are also many pitfalls in these approaches. Not least unequal power relationships and tensions within communities, as well as the danger of creating a process that is led more by 'professionals' than by the community itself – which may actually reiterate the oppressive power relationships that caused the problem (whether this be homelessness or displacement pressures) in the first place. There is also a danger that these projects may be perceived as piecemeal, one-off interventions that will have little impact on the cycles of displacement locally, nationally and internationally. However, we believe that bringing about sustainable change must involve a gradual accumulation of actions led by those who are most affected by the issues, as a means of challenging neoliberal urban practices[37] and building a viable alternative.

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[37] Heather McLean, "Cracks in the creative city: The contradictions of community arts practice," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, 6 (2014): 2156–73.

Image 8: An event in *Protohome* about housing and art practices (photo credit: Julia Heslop)

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